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ABSTRACT

This study identifies factors that affect school refusal among preschool children in public schools of an Appalachian state. School refusal is defined as behavior through which children refuse school by active protest, inactive protest, or denial. A random sample of 198 preschool teachers representing 6,309 children provided the data for the study. Teachers completed three short questionnaires concerning both the school and the child's school refusal behavior over three time periods. Results show that 15.6% of the children manifested the symptoms of school refusal. Some findings were: (1) school refusers were more likely to be boys; (2) more than one third were youngest children; (3) fewer children who lived less than two miles from the school and who had had prior preschool experience exhibited refusal; and (4) fewer refusals occurred in part-day sessions and sessions held on consecutive days where parents were included and the teacher was experienced in early childhood education. The following categories describe the events preceding refusal behavior: (1) school regulations; (2) separation from friend or sibling; (3) bus fears; (4) academic demands; (5) new experiences or people; and (6) fear of gym or gym teacher. Seven patterns of refusal were identified, based on the time periods of the refusal. Recommendations for preventing school refusal deal with intake procedures, structure of the sessions, experience of the teachers, developmental needs of students, parental participation, and bus practices. The survey instruments are attached. (KS)

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SCHOOL REFUSAL IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Joanna Strosnider Nesselroad

Concern about school attendance did not begin until the early part of the 20th century when school became mandatory. At first, the children were considered to be truants, but later they were considered to be suffering from some kind of a disorder. Nomenclature and etiology of the disorder was unclear, It was called "school phobia", "school avoidance", "separation anxiety", and "school refusal" (sometimes interchangeably). Gradually school refusal came to be considered a rather complicated syndrome that was not uniform in etiology, structure or therapy.

By 1970 many states had started public preschool programs. This author heard many teachers indicating that the programs were teaching children to hate school, and some parents complained that their children did not want to go to school. This author had observed "school refusal" in older Appalachian children and was beginning to observe the same phenomenon in young Appalachian children. Nursery school teachers recognized "school refusal" behavior as a normal regression in the "separation/individuation" process, when the three and four-year-old children first entered school. However, this did not explain why these children started refusing school after a normal entrance; or why older preschool children did not want to attend school. David Loof (1971) reported that in his clinic in Southern Appalachia 20 percent of his load was children with school phobia; this was in contrast to Kennedy (1965) who indicated the incidence in clinics to be 1.7 percent of school age children per year.

This study was designed to identify school practices that affect school refusal in children in preschool programs in the public schools of an Appalachian state. The state represents the two subregions of Northern and Central Appalachia with an overlay of the Appalachian Highlands. Central Appalachia is the area often considered to be Appalachia.

DEFINITION

School refusal is defined as a behavior by children wherein they refuse school in one or a combination of the following ways:

Active Protest: They may cry scream, cling to their mother, ask for their mother, refuse to get on the school bus, or attempt to run away from school.

Inactive Protest: They may sit frozen in a chair; refuse to remove their coat or shoes or other outer garments; refuse to use the toilet, eat or rest while at school; and may cry or stay close to a parent when they pick them up at school, or when they arrive at home if they come to school on a bus.

They may show physical symptoms including: stomach ache, diarrhea, sore throat, slight temperature, vomiting, leg aches or bed wetting. These symptoms usually go away when the child is allowed to stay home. Even though they have mild illnesses, most children want to go to school. The school refusal child, however, wants to stay home.

Denial: Some children show no distress on being separated from parents or neighborhood, but they may not communicate with adults or other children at school. They play in an isolated fashion, not participating in group activities. If their mother arrives to pick them up, they may make her wait while they do one more thing. They take care of their own needs, and act as if they are not in the school at all.

PROCEDURES

The data were collected from the preschool teachers in the state. A random sample by counties was drawn. There was an adjusted sample of 198 teachers in the study, which represented 6,309 children. This was 22% of the children born in the state five years preceding the study.

The study was done over three time periods in order to plot the severity of the refusal (the first four weeks of school (T1), between four and eight weeks (T2), and between eight and twelve weeks (T3). A survey research approach was used. The survey consisted of three short questionnaires that were filled out by the teacher: 1) School Questionnaire, 2) Child questionnaires A and B. These questionnaires were developed by the author. The items reflect practices or situations that various authors have found to prevent or accentuate school refusal in preschool children.

The school questionnaire had three sections. The first section included enrollment numbers, the days children attended school and the length of sessions. The second section dealt with intake procedures and practices relating to toileting, rest, and eating. The third section dealt with teacher certification and experience.

The individual child's questionnaire had two parts, A and B. Part A of the questionnaire included age, ordinal position, nationality, race, isolation and prior social experiences. It was filled out during the time period that the child first exhibited school refusal and was filled out only once. Part B, relating to symptoms that the child manifested, was checked at each point in time that the child showed symptoms of refusal.

Data were analyzed utilizing the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) program for the contingency chi square with the IBM 360-75 model computer. No

norms seem to exist for the measures of isolation, the data were reported in frequencies and percents.

The results of the study show 990 children, or 15.6% who manifested symptoms of school refusal as recognized by their teachers.

The findings indicated some data relating refusal to characteristics of the children involved: (1) There were significantly more refusals among older children than younger children when examining four, five and six-year-olds; (2) refusals were more likely to be boys than girls; and (3) more than a third were youngest children.

In terms of isolation: (1) a smaller percent of the children who showed refusal lived less than two miles from school than beyond two miles of school; and (2) fewer children who had had prior preschool experience showed refusal than did children who had not had prior preschool experience.

The findings display significantly fewer refusals where: (1) the children attended part-day rather than full-day sessions; (2) the children attended two or more days in succession, rather than being at school a day and home a day and back to school; (3) practices included parents rather than excluded parents; (4) gradual intake procedures were used (prior home visits, visits to school, etc.); (5) and where the teacher was experienced in early childhood education.

Events that immediately preceded the refusal behavior and seemed to be the immediate cause of the onset of the behavior were identified by the teachers. The most frequently indicated events are presented in Table 1. They are listed by time periods in the order of their frequency of occurrence. School regulations included fire drills, safety rules, afraid of not doing right, bathroom rules, late enrollment with no provision for a prior home visit, and switched from one session to another. Separated from friend or sibling included placement

in different rooms, in different seats or in different activities. Bus fears included a long ride, fear of not getting the bus, fear of bus driver or big kids, fear of bus room and lack of consistency in busing. Academic demands included fear when doing work, afraid of making errors, wants to stop and finish later, won't finish work, refuses to try to make letters, didn't do homework, reads fluently and wanted books, wants to go home when doing work, doesn't like workbooks and exercises or subject matter materials required by the school administration. New experiences or persons included being taken to other room, various testing and health procedures, and resource teachers. Fear of gym or gym teacher occurred so frequently, it was carried as a separate factor.

Many precipitating events remained the same in all three time periods but changed in prominence. Bus fears maintained in third or second place. New teachers and gym teachers were added in the second time period, and break in attendance and punishment were new in the third time period.

Findings in this study indicated seven patterns of refusal over time, rather than three patterns (mild, moderate, marked) as reported by other authors. Of the seven patterns, three were of children who refused in only one of each of the three time periods. The fourth pattern of refusal was of children who refused during both the first and second time period. The fifth pattern of refusal was of children who refused in the first and third period but did not show refusal symptoms in the second time period. The sixth pattern of refusal was of children who refused in the second and third time periods, but not in the first. The seventh pattern of refusal was of children who refused in all three time periods.

SIGNIFICANCE

The fact that there were children who started refusing in both the second and third months of school who had not refused earlier, indicates the need to initiate action for change in school practices that involve both intake procedures, and later school practices.

Children who protest being in school or block out their presence in school, will derive little benefit from the school experience. Anna Freud (1965) indicated that denial interferes with accuracy in the perception of the outer world. This interferes with memory,and the child will have damage to further development.

Loof and Smith (1961) indicated that the same children who have difficulty functioning in early childhood often exhibit school refusal during latency and adolescence, as well as work refusal as adults. Schmitt (1971) emphasized that school refusal is easier to prevent than treat. This study has given several guides for prevention:

1. The school system should plan for gradual intake procedures, and consider these procedures an integral part of the program for the children's development and learning.
2. The schools should maintain part-day and continuous sessions.
3. Experienced teachers should be hired to work with young children.
4. School systems should define the role of the teacher to include working with parents.
5. School systems need to modify their practices so that children from the various subcultural groups can have an initial positive attitude toward school. This would include housing the first school experience near the children's home, coupled with outings

to the larger community. It would also include beginning the formal academic curriculum after the children are ready developmentally.

6. School systems should be aware of the many instances where special teachers and special programs have been the precipitating factors in children refusing school. The timing for the beginning of the programs, as well as program content and teacher technique, should be scrutinized in terms of being developmentally appropriate for the children involved.
7. The school system should consider its role in relation to immunization of children for disease. Several children in this study were sent home from school, and never returned, because they had not been immunized. There did not seem to be any procedure to get the children back into school after they were immunized.
8. The high incidence of boys who refused indicates that the school regulations and academic practices were geared more toward the maturation and activity level of girls. School systems need to look at developmental level as well as chronological age in admitting children. They also need to incorporate academic practices that enhance the development of boys as well as girls.
9. The significance of older children showing more refusals than younger children indicates a need for programs for children at age four; and for work with parents in relation to the separation/individuation process.
10. School systems should use the child's support system; parents, friends and siblings to help the child cope with the new and changing demands of the school situation.

11. School systems should review bus practice in terms of length of time the child spends waiting for the bus and on the bus. There needs to be some provision for a consistent caretaker on the bus and in bus room with the children.

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Table 1

Precipitating Events of School Refusal Listed by Time Periods in the Order of Their Frequency of Occurance

First Four Weeks (T_1)	Between Four and Eight Weeks (T_2)	Between Eight and Twelve Weeks (T_3)
School regulations	Academic demands	{Break in attendance
Separated from friend or sibling	{Break in attendance	{Bus fears
Bus fears	{Bus fears	Punishment of child or other child
Beginning school		
{Academic demands	{New situations	|Fear of gym or gym teacher
{New situations or persons	{Gym or gym teacher fears	Separated from friend o sibling
{Marital crises	{School regulations	Immaturity or twin
|Immaturity or twin	{Separated from friend or sibling	Death or illness of par
Death or illness of parent	{Sent home for lack of immunization	Lunch time
Medical procedures	{Lunch time	Toilet fears
Fear of gym teacher		New enrolee
Lunch time	|Nap	New situations
Toilet fears	New enrolee	School demands
Nap		
New enrolee		

Note: { = The events precipated refusal approximately the same number of times.

\| = Other precipitating events of that time period.

School No. _____

SCHOOL QUESTIONNAIRE

Directions: Complete this form that indicates your school's practices and procedures. Return it the 5th week of school.

A.
Type of Program: Circle one ECE Head Start Day Care

_____ 1. Date school began

_____ 2. Number of children in your room.

_____ Number of 4 year olds
_____ Number of 5 year olds
_____ Number of 6 year olds

3. Please circle the days children attend school

M T W Th F -- Session I M T W Th F -- Session II

4. Please indicate the time children arrive and leave for each session

_____ _____ Session I _____ _____ Session II
arrive leave arrive leave

5. Any other attendance plan _____

B. After a child is enrolled for Early Childhood there are many and varied procedures used during the fall to get them started. Please check all of the procedures used in your school. [X]

_____ 1. The teacher visits in the children's homes before school begins.

_____ 2. Children visit their school room and teacher with their parents or substitutes in the fall before school begins.

_____ 3. The preschool visit includes a visit to the toilet.

_____ 4. The child is encouraged to operate both toilet and lavatory.

_____ 5. The preschool visit includes a visit to the school lunchroom.

_____ 6. The first week of school children attend in small groups for a short period of time and gradually build the number to full enrollment and a full school day.

_____ 7. Children have a lie-down rest period.

_____ 8. A parent or substitute stays with the child during the intake period if the parent or child expresses a desire to do so.

_____ 9. If parents remain at school, they stay in a room other than their child's room.

_____10. Teachers visit over 3 times a year in the children's homes.

_____11. Parents assist over 3 times in the classroom or on field trips.

_____12. The teacher and parents communicate often and freely about the children.

_____13. The teacher enlists the parents help on such things as how they comfort their child, his fears, his joys, etc.

C. Education and Experience of teacher:

_____ 1. Certification (please list all)

_____ _____

_____ 2. Degree or hours beyond a bachelors

_____ 3. Year first degree acquired

_____ 4. Total years experience

_____ 5. Years experience in preschool

School Number _____

Child's Code _____ Session

INDIVIDUAL CHILD'S QUESTIONNAIRE - PART A

Directions: 1. Complete one form for each child showing any signs of school refusal during the first month of school.

2. Complete one form for each child showing any signs of school refusal between the 4th and 8th week or beyond 8 weeks of school if you have not filled out the form for this child before.

A. Personal data

(Put in letters D.K. for any items you don't know)

_____ 1. Date child started school.

_____ 2. Indicate the session child attends (I or II).

_____ 3. Age.

_____ 4. Sex.

_____ 5. Race.

_____ 6. National origin.

_____ 7. Miles child lives from the school.

_____ 8. Mode of transportation (walk, bus, private car).

_____ 9. Miles child lives from a social institution providing goods or services to his family. (service station, grocery store, church, etc.).

10. Ordinal position in family (mark with X)

___ Oldest ___ Middle ___ Youngest ___ Only Child

11. Eligible for free lunch (mark with X)

___ Yes ___ No

B. Prior social experience and intake experiences (use D.K. for unknown items).

Yes	No		
___	___	1.	Brings a blanket or other special object from home.
___	___	2.	The child's parent or a substitute stayed with him/her at school, when he/she desired the first of school.
___	___	3.	Attends Sunday school or church regularly.
___	___	4.	There are regular visitors in this child's home.
___	___	5.	Attended regularly a preschool program (head start, day care, etc.) prior to this year.
___	___	6.	Has this child had a regular sitter, in his own home or the home of another? Age of child when this began _____.

School Number _____

Child's Code _____ Session

INDIVIDUAL CHILD'S QUESTIONNAIRE - PART B

Directions: Complete one form for each child showing any signs of school refusal during the first month of school, between the 4th and 8th week of school, and over 8 weeks of school.

[Explanation: Some children show refusal early, some continuously, and some later. Early refusers may change the way they are refusing or seem to adjust and then refuse again. Therefore, you may return a form for some children 3 times, for others 2 times, and others only once.]

_____ When did the disturbance begin?
Date

_____
Precipitation event that caused school refusal [if known]

Directions: Check all symptoms that this child shows

_____ 1. Cries and clings to mother or substitute when they are leaving.

_____ 2. Cries or clings to mother or substitute when they return.

_____ 3. When mother or substitute arrives to pick him/her up he/she makes her wait while he does one more thing.

_____ 4. Cries or asks for mother or substitute or home.

_____ 5. On leaving home refuses school bus or attempts to leave school.

_____ 6. Sits frozen in a chair.

_____ 7. Refuses to remove outer garments.

_____ 8. Refuses or is uncomfortable using toilet at school.

_____ 9. Refuses or is uncomfortable eating school lunch.

_____10. Refuses or is more uncomfortable than other children during rest.

_____11. Has a stomach ache, vomiting or diarrhea.

_____12. Has a sore throat.

_____13. Has a slight temperature.

_____14. Wets bed at night or wets at school.

_____15. Plays or exists in an isolated fashion at school.

_____16. Takes care of own needs [doesn't seek adult help even if needed].

_____17. Poor school attendance.

_____
Others or Comments